

FQ review

Boozer CAREER MOVIES

946 words (main text)

Jack Boozer, *Career Movies: American Business and the Success Mystique* (Austin: U of Texas Press, 2002). 292 pages. \$22.95 paper; \$55.00 hardcover

Class analysis of film typically deals with the neglect or distortion of representing the industrial working class. Jack Boozer's *Career Movies: American Business and the Success Mystique* reminds us that class analysis applies to executives and entrepreneurs too. Concentrating on films from the second half of the 20th century, Boozer argues that depictions of business careers form a major theme in American cinema. Looking at a diverse selection of films, the author convincingly details a deep cultural ambivalence in US culture between endorsement of laissez faire capitalism, especially in its entrepreneurial stage and concomitant promotion of an individualist ethos, on the one hand, and the competing need for regulation and control to promote the social good. Recent events such as the Enron scandal are a perfect example. The energy-trading innovators became celebrities in the business press and beyond--essentially beyond criticism and untouchable--until total meltdowns and the rats started deserting the sinking ship. Damning tapes caught manipulators laughing at how artificially inflated energy prices could cause suffering for elderly widows.

Boozer develops his analysis with suggestive examples rather than an exhaustive inventory. A good choice, this makes the book readable, provocative at times, and richly suggestive as it details the many dramas, some comedies, and key satires of business success.

Predictably, the first chapter studies the classical corporate executive film with central attention to *Executive Suite* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and the little-known adaptation of a Rod Serling TV drama, *Patterns*, to the big screen. Thus Boozer satisfies the predictable expectation and also provides an interesting change of pace. One of the study's most refreshing aspects highlights these unexpected examples which complicate analysis. Thus the chapter on career women provides *Mildred Pierce* and *Working Girl* as key examples and concludes with *The Grifters*. Likewise, the chapter on entrepreneurs presents *Save the Tiger* and *Tucker: The Man and his Dreams* while making an unexpected detour to *Mississippi Masala* and *Do the Right Thing* (Sal's Pizza), and then turning to femmes fatales in *Disclosure* and *The Last Seduction* with a side glance at *Chinatown*. Boozer's chapter on the public relations figure begins with *The Hucksters* and *Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?* before proceeding to a tour de force original analysis of *North By Northwest* (Thornhill as ad exec). Included in this chapter: *The Electric Horseman*, *The Player*, and *Jerry McGuire*. An additional chapter on "televisuality" is more conventional in looking at *Wag the Dog*, *The Truman Show*, *Pleasantville*, and *The Insider*.

Boozer's study of the ideology of success in US business film points at the persistence of the myth for individuals which is increasingly transformed and thwarted by the shift to a globalized market propelled by high tech, service and financial sectors. In discussions of *Wall Street* and *American Beauty*, bookending the volume, Boozer points out how the previous norm of a perceived public good resulting from balancing the goals of corporations and families has declined with the neoconservative triumph of market solutions for everything; in an "ownership society," the social bond evaporates. The small business and grassroots values of a Capra-esque America are contradicted by the high failure rate of petty entrepreneurs amid the corporate encroachment of big box chain stores. Of course there is a massive contradiction between the "family values" asserted by social

conservatives and fundamentalists and the actual behavior of corporations engaged in union-busting, forced overtime, reduced or denied benefits and pensions.

While it seems unlikely that the business success film will suddenly be regarded as a basic film genre, Boozer's argument produces an excellent overview of cultural and historic change as reflected/distorted in postwar films. Inevitably in a study of this type, the reader can productively question what seem like significant omissions such as the gangster as businessman, or more recent biopics which highlight entertainment and sports figures as working within capitalist contexts. The study could have benefited from a wider view that pointed to persistent American tropes such as the Confidence Man, or major artists who address the American success myth such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Preston Sturges. Because the study confines itself to cinema, it neglects any mention of television which provides many pertinent texts, ranging from bedroom and boardroom melodramas (*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, etc.) to gangsters (*The Sopranos*, *The Wire*), and of course, *The Apprentice*. Probably every reader will come up with their own unexplained omissions (e.g., *Falling Down*, *The Coneheads*, *The Hudsucker Proxy*; my own personal peeve--no discussion of *Fight Club*). In an even wider frame, it seems that much of the critique of the American success myth also transpires in nonbusiness corporate structures: obviously the government, including the military, law enforcement, and the law, but also in key cases the church (*The Cardinal*, *Leap of Faith*), medicine, education and the arts. Since most Americans don't pursue a business career and our best MBA programs have a majority of students from abroad, perhaps business success now is a vanishing goal.

In terms of a larger, international film analysis, examining the ideology of success through Hollywood film presents one obvious old problem. The dominant cinema's narrative forms have never moved behind a drama of individuals to provide a collective or structural analysis of the system as a whole. As Brecht pointed out so well, the realist-

naturalist tradition remains mired in an emotional individualism that inhibits more reflective thought about deeper sources of problems and more profound solutions than simple changes of heart or luck. But that calls for a cinema which defines success beyond individual careers and affluence. Films which imagine success as raising a whole community's standard of living, or improving the environment, or providing universal healthcare, or achieving social justice occupy a different space.

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